

HR Leaders Panel: Wisdom and Humor in an Era of Always-On Transparency and Immediacy

SANTA CLARA—MAY 3, 2017—After revealing a few little-known bits of personal history, including a couple stints in Disneyland jail, an unfortunate encounter with a drunken pop star, and an uncanny ability to win at sports betting, top HR execs from five Silicon Valley companies settled into a free-wheeling panel discussion at HR Symposium 2017.

They delved into the theme of the day: the future of work and the employee experience—sharing wisdom learned from years of success as well as missteps that raised some sympathetic laughter from the audience of close to 500 HR specialists. The panel included: Kelli Dragovich, senior vice president of people at Hired; Liane Hornsey, senior vice president and chief human resources officer at Uber Technologies, Inc.; Britt Sellin, vice president of human resources at Cloudera; Dawn Sharifan, head of people operations at Slack Technology; and Margaret Wheeler, chief people and culture officer at Stitch Fix. At the helm as moderator was Jeff Diana, a previous panelist and seasoned executive with more than 20 years of experience in the human resources field.

Topics ranged from how to evaluate employee experience and how to lead through change to name a favorite CEO, your worst HR buzzword and, of course, millennials.

THE IDEAL EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

“It needs to start with knowing yourself, understanding and being deliberate about your culture, your business model and being very explicit about what that is,” said Wheeler, describing the ideal experience that she is trying to create for Stitch Fix talent. The business model and the culture you’re creating are symbiotic. Stitch Fix people love problem-solving, collaboration and having fun, she said.

At Hired, where the company’s mission is “to find everyone a job they love,” they want to match that internally, Dragovich said. “It fit with my personal values.” Define what that looks like and define the experience around that so that when people come into work they feel like they’re doing something that ... feels almost like a hobby rather than an exchange of goods.”

Slack, a software collaboration platform, the employee experience reflects the passion they have for their product, which includes high transparency and authenticity.

“The care and craftsmanship with which they build their product is what I try to build into the employee experience,” Sharifan said.

Lightning Round Questions

WHAT IS STAYING THE SAME in HR?

- You always have to add value. You have to do it in the context you’re in and you have to deliver something that’s important for the business, not necessarily something that looks good. (Sellin)
- It’s humans doing work for the most part and there is this yearning for people to be seen, to be able to contribute, to be connected. That

That translates to similarly caring for customers and employees.

“At the end of the day somebody has to feel proud of what they’re doing, what they’ve created,” said Sellin. Cloudera, the big data company that earned a spot on this year’s Best Places To Work list for the second year, just announced a public offering a few days earlier. People have to know they’re important, have great ideas and are there to create something really special, Sellin said. “They have to have a voice. They have to be treated like adults.”

Hornsey, who is new to Uber, noted that the company doubled its headcount last year to 13,000, and amid all that change, it is paramount that people feel heard, listened to and valued.

“Each and every person at work needs to feel that their work and their effort and their personality and their whole self is valued,” she said. “If you don’t achieve that, you don’t build a fantastic company.” What does every individual need to feel valued? “You can’t script that.” The employee experience is about helping your managers be good enough to have those individual conversations. “If you get that right, all else will fall into place.”

MILLENNIALS: DO THEY WANT ANYTHING DIFFERENT? HOW DO WE ADDRESS THAT?

After acknowledging that there’s a lot of data about millennials having a different, less positive, mindset about work, Wheeler suggested most of it “is a lot of hooey” and urged people to challenge stereotypes. Despite commonalities among people in different stages of life, she just couldn’t put all millennials in a bucket and say they’re “all like that,” she said.

“It’s something that if we allow it to be true, it’s true, but if we are meeting people as individuals I want to challenge people. Is it true?”

IMMEDIACY OF TODAY

However, one difference stood out. Millennials have grown up in an era of unprecedented immediacy and speed, panelists said.

“For the people who have born in the 80s and beyond, simply because the world is changing, the expectation is much more immediate. What is happening for them needs to be faster,” Hornsey said.

At Hired, 70 percent of the workforce is composed of millennials.

element I don’t think is changing.
(Wheeler)

WHAT COMPANY’S EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE DO YOU MOST ADMIRE? (not your own)

- **Airbnb**—For how they tie it all to the employee experience and hosting experience.
- **Intuit**—For how they have mastered the integration of their eight values into all aspects of their culture.
- **MDM**—For revamping its business model and putting it into talent and design.
- **Medallia**—For doing really interesting things with their branding and development.
- **Netflix**—For total transparency and honesty.
- **Patagonia**—For explicitly creating its business destiny and the environment they create for their employees and how that syncs up with the rest of the world.
- **Sun Microsystems** (before it was absorbed by Oracle)—For being so great that even when it was struggling economically, really talented people remained devoted to the company and

“They have some of the best ideas,” Dragovich said. “They’re pushing more. But, because it’s usually their first or second job, they often need more transparency and context to understand why something isn’t happening right away. “And, does that make sense? Do they believe it?”

HARD EDGE OF TRANSPARENCY

Creating a space for people to have a voice, whether you feel that they’re entitled or not, is going to be important and a requirement for business going forward, Sharifan said.

Adding the expectation of transparency brings more challenges. Expectant and abrupt voices and public disclosures that happen online, in many instances, would have been unacceptable workplace behavior just a decade ago. There have been times, panelists said, that online posts that hurt or humiliate others or disclose sensitive information have been extremely challenging in the workplace.

“I do believe transparency in communication in the future of work and I wanted to be at the center of that,” Sharifan said. However, the level of transparency can be uncomfortable when people “are speaking their truth” about sensitive subjects by posting something personal online about themselves or others.

It’s changing the job of HR by requiring more context and transparency and voices are getting louder and more abrupt, “which is fine but you’re kind of caught in this vice sometimes in how you respond,” Dragovich said.

Transparency simply doesn’t give employees a right to hurt each other, Wheeler said. If we let it happen, “we risk losing what we’re trying to create.”

At Stitch Fix, the core belief is that ultimately people are reasonable and want to live in a world that is not aggressive; people will consider rules of engagement. “To help people not be hurt is part of what we do,” she said.

stayed on to the end.

BUSINESS LEADER YOU ADMIRE MOST. Why?

- **Mehul Patel** of Hired—“Our CEO is the reason I joined Hired. He is one of the most human, driven leaders that has an amazing business sense but also just a humility and the ability to understand people and the organization that connects to that.” (Dragovich)
- **Stewart Butterfield** of Slack—“We’re deep in the jungle together,” Sharifan)
- **Christopher Young** of McAfee—“He is the most balanced leader I’ve ever seen,” Sellin said. “He’s strategic. He’s great at driving teams to action. He’s got tons of humility. He’s just amazing.”
- **Stephen Kerr** of Golden State Warriors—“He’s able to be authentic, actually share what he believes even in the world if it could be potentially controversial. He seems to have lot of integrity and character.” (Wheeler)
- **Can’t Decide** “I could give you ten different people.” (Hornsey)

DATA AND AI: HOW IS IT. CHANGING YOUR WORK?

- “Fifteen years ago, everything I did was by intuition, by my own EEL and face-to-face diagnostic,” Hornsey said. “Everything I do now is about predictive analytics, to understand pain points or positive spots in the organization is just changing the nature of what I do. I usually start with an intuitive feeling, go look for the data, then go back to the intuition and check it out and then act. I don’t do anything, other than go to the loo, without looking at data.”
- “There’s this opportunity for AI and bot in work. There are so many things are repetitive so if we can build that intelligence in so those things are answered, it will give us more time to have thoughtful work.” Sharifan said.

“They don’t ask us if they can post things about the company. Everything is out there now.”

And sometimes transparency, feedback can slow down resolutions, especially if HR is tasked with inviting universal input.

“It’s going to take more time,” Hornsey said. “It’s a real dilemma—how do you deliver speed and involve everyone that wants to be involved in the decisions?”

HOW DO YOU DRIVE CHANGE?

Training Isn’t Enough. Sixty-three percent of the managers at Uber were new when she came on board, which contributes to challenges at the company, Hornsey said.

“We’re asking very young people to manage other people for the first time and everyone in this room knows that that’s super hard.” If training worked, you could just be done with it, but it doesn’t.

“Training is like taking heroine,” Hornsey said. “It’s a shot in the arm. You go out and you feel fantastic and then you bloody well forget and you need more.” For Uber, that means more of a focus on coaching one-on-one and in small groups where people can learn from each other.

Feedback & Listening. One of the ways you can ensure people feel heard is to ask for feedback and show them that their feedback made a difference, Sellin said.

“We always remind people, ‘Here is something we changed from last year based on your feedback,’” Sellin said. Even an email to one person whose suggestion was implemented should get a message. “Each of our leaders does this same thing.”

Also remind them that everyone owns the employee experience, panelists said. That includes individuals being responsible for contributing what they can to solving problems.

BIGGEST TREND: HOW WORK IS CHANGING?

- **Time Horizon.** It’s a moment in time. More and more work is not about longevity with any particular company. That impacts everything we do really significantly. If we’re managing people for a year or two that’s very different than what we can do if they’re working for five or seven. It’s about the experience you can have while aligned with that company. (Hornsey)
- **Customization.** I think we forget that we’re so far ahead of the rest of the country—whether it’s bringing your bike to work or a billion chat channels and conversational channels...You can wear whatever you like, as long as you wear something. (Sellin)
- **Transparency.** I don’t think there’s one thing but I think we will have increasing amounts of transparency in order to retain the trust between employer and employee. (Sharifan)
- **Speed.** The way work is getting done. It’s real quick. It’s impacting the employee experience, expectations and where people work and when. It will be more flexible, more team-oriented. We’re going to be more and more engaged in doing that. (Dragovich)
- **Techno-Human Harmony.** Rather than a dystopian future where technology steals everyone’s jobs, we’re going to see a more harmonious relationship between human creative ingenuity and automated technology. What can the algorithm do to free up more time for the people to do what they do best? (Wheeler)
- **Full Circle?** I wonder if the request for the experience is going to come full circle. Just like so many things, there’s often a backlash at a certain point. The human experience is always there. People want that connection. Curious how that will be. (Wheeler)

Leading Through Change. Change is so ubiquitous that managers need to learn how to lead even through uncertain times, Dragovich said.

“The real trick for this profession is to help people lead in the gray and live in the gray. I don’t think this mechanical training is going to do it anymore. You’ve got to figure out a way to reach out to connect with folks, then they’ll trust and then we fan it out. We have to help these folks talk through the gray area.”

Include Leadership. Wheeler described culture as an ecosystem that starts with who you choose to promote.

“You can’t just send people to a course and expect them to pop out a manager,” she said. Referring to an earlier keynote presentation by entrepreneur/author Chris Yeh, Wheeler said that great talent shouldn’t be the only criteria for bringing someone on board. It is equally important to be deliberate about who you don’t invite into the company as who you do. And, not everyone should be a manager. Training, she said, can be effective when leadership values it and is willing to tell his or her own stories of development.

Language Matters. Diana noted how difficult it can be to help leaders, especially some of those with highly technical backgrounds, really understand the value of feelings.

“Think through the experiences you have and package it as data,” Diana said.

Top Talent. Not everyone will have the same employee experience. While everyone in a company has value, “there are people who are unique creators,” Sellin said. These folks are steeped in technology that people don’t understand and often strategy revolves around them. “They can essentially name their price. At that level, people get to customize their experience just a little bit more. What they want is something that’s creative and interesting. If you give them maintenance work, they’ll probably kill you in the parking lot. Those are people we really have to manage.”

FAVORITE TOOL TO DRIVE COLLABORATION?

- Google Docs
- Zoom Video Conferencing
- Google Hangout
- A Collaborative Attitude

PERCENTAGE OF REMOTE WORKERS IN 2020?

- < 5% (Hornsey)
- 10% (Sellin)
- 30% (Dragovich/Wheeler)
- 40/30: 40% in Silicon Valley, 30% in the rest of the U.S. (Sharifan)

LEAST FAVORITE HR BUZZ WORD:

- Succession
- Intervention
- Engagement
- The Business
- My Clients
- Seat at the Table

FAVORITE HR WORD OR PHRASE:

- Predictive Analytics
- Thank You
- Safe Space
- Tell Me More

BEST HR ADVICE:

- Hire an incredible team. (Hornsey)
- There are nine ways to skin a cat. There’s no one answer. There are multiple ways to approach a problem. (Sellin)
- Self-awareness is the key to everything. (Sharifan)
- Timing is key: Know when and how to do things at the right time. (Dragovich)
- Don’t be distracted. (Wheeler)

Consumption Culture. What we don't want to create are companies where people consume the culture, Wheeler said, describing an environment of promising to give employees everything they can consume as way of trying to provide a personalized experience. "We're not going to give you 50 kinds of kombucha," Wheeler said. Instead we want people who generate culture. It's the individual and everyone's responsibility to really build the success of the company and drive culture.

Data-Informed EQ. Prior to data analytics, HR leaders used to rely solely on intuition. Now, a great people person needs to understand data, especially predictive analytics, connect with key change agents and have strong intuition about when is the moment to change, Hornsey said.

"There is a moment for change and if you try to drive it at the wrong moment, you will meet resistance and inadvertently fall back from that goal, Hornsey said. "The most important thing I'd say is don't get it wrong."

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